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SUBJECT: EASTER AND THE PROTESTANT COMMUNITY IN SOUTHERN AND CENTRAL VIETNAM

REF: 05 HCMC 1212; B) 05 HCMC 1082; C) HCMC 72; D) 05 HCMC 910

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Protestant Easter celebrations generally were peaceful throughout Central and Southern Vietnam, including in the Central Highlands. Unregistered house churches were told to apply for permission to hold Easter services, but largely were not prevented from celebrating the holiday even if they refused. In late April, HCMC authorities allowed unregistered Baptist groups to hold the first officially-sanctioned public revival meeting in the city since 1975. However, a number of congregations of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam and unregistered house churches continue to face serious harassment. Most of these incidents occur in rural areas and often involve the ethnic minorities. A key Protestant leader in the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai reported that an ethnic minority group in the United States continues to foment ethnic minority separatism and seeks to undermine the independence and credibility of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam.

¶2. (SBU) Summary continued: House church leaders remain suspicious of the GVN and reluctant to register under the new legal framework on religion. Vietnamese officials say they are frustrated by this unwillingness to register, despite their "encouragement." We have urged the GVN to build confidence in the house church community by responding to religious freedom violations. End Summary.

Easter for the House Church Community

¶3. (SBU) With a few notable exceptions, Easter services for house churches in southern and central Vietnam went smoothly according to Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan, President of the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF), an umbrella organization for unrecognized house churches. Overall conditions for religious freedom also continue to improve. However, police had prohibited celebrations at the Full Gospel Church in Quy Nhon city in Binh Dinh province (Central Vietnam) and at a house church of the United Gospel Outreach Church (UGOC), in a rural community in Tra Vinh province (Mekong Delta). According to Nhan, police in Tra Vinh have repeatedly stopped services and confiscated religious materials on the grounds that they were not published legally. On a more positive note, a house church in HCMC's District 2 belonging to the Inter-Evangelistic Movement of Pastor Tran Mai has not been harassed following ConGen's intervention with HCMC authorities in early April. Pastor Nguyen Quang Trung's Mennonites and the Seventh Day Adventist church also did not report any harassment. (Both organizations are legally registered in HCMC.)

¶4. (SBU) Pastor Nhan gave us a copy of an April 3 decision of a

district-level Party Secretary in Binh Phuoc province explicitly prohibiting unregistered house church organizations from holding services in the district. In his decision, the Party Secretary argued that "bad elements" could exploit house church services to undermine social and political order in the district. However, when the local UGOC pastor refused to comply with the requirement to register his church and list congregation members, police backed down and allowed Easter services to continue.

First Sanctioned Revival in 31 years

15. (SBU) PolOff attended an April 28 Baptist Easter revival, in a jam-packed theater in HCMC's District 5. The meeting was organized by Pastor Nguyen Ngoc Hien, head of the Vietnam Baptist Fellowship, the largest umbrella organization for Vietnam's Baptist house churches. Local government, Party and police (uniformed and plainclothes) were in attendance throughout the three-hour prayer meeting. This was the first time since 1975 that unrecognized house church organizations have secured official government approval to hold a prayer meeting in a public venue. Pastor Hien said that HCMC authorities pressed him to hire the biggest hall possible so that the Baptists could celebrate Easter en masse, a sharp contrast to past years when police discouraged the Baptists from gathering to celebrate Christmas and Easter.

New Life Fellowship

16. (SBU) Pastor Eric Dooley, head of the expatriate New Life Fellowship church reported that he organized public services in the garden of an HCMC hotel for 250 expatriates. This marks the first time that the New Life Fellowship (NLF) has been able to gather on a large scale since August 2005, when police halted the church's services (Ref A). The NLF continues to meet in smaller groups in the homes of worshipers for regular Sunday services. Pastor Dooley is continuing quiet discussions with

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HCMC and GVN representatives on a permanent solution. (Comment: we have made clear to HCMC officials our desire to see a satisfactory solution to the NLF saga. End Comment.)

To Register, or Not To Register

17. (SBU) Nhan indicated that there was a division of opinion within the VEF on whether to comply with government requirements to apply for permission to hold Easter services. Some refused outright, others were more open, but balked at listing all the names and addresses of church goers. Nhan added that the debate within the VEF extends to the broader question of whether house churches should register with the government under the new legal framework on religion and under what conditions. He noted that churches that refused to apply to hold Easter services did not face any harassment or discrimination.

Central Highlands

18. (SBU) In Dak Lak province, Pastor Huynh Cuong of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) said that the GVN-recognized church was able to conduct Easter services in its eight recognized churches and hundreds of meeting points in most districts in the province. However, SECV adherents in Ku Mgar and Ea Sup districts were only allowed to worship at home. District officials argued that the churches there were not yet formally registered. In other districts in Dak Lak, SECV congregations were able to hold services without formally registering with local authorities. Pastor Cuong added that 20 additional SECV congregations in Dak Lak are in the process of securing official recognition.

19. (SBU) Pastor Nguyen Toi, head of the Danang-based United

World Mission Church (UWMC), said that only one of his churches was harassed over Easter. (The UWMC operates house churches throughout the Central Highlands and central coastal Vietnam.) According to Pastor Toi, police prevented an ethnic Bru church in the Van Kieu hamlet of Ea Kar district in Dak Lak from holding Easter services. Village authorities subsequently issued an administrative reprimand and summoned the preacher, Ha Van Hiep, for three days of questioning. They reportedly told the preacher that the Prime Minister's February 2005 "Instruction on Protestantism" may apply elsewhere in Vietnam, but not there. Pastor Toi noted that this particular house church has endured a long history of police harassment. Pastor Toi also noted that the UWMC still awaits a GVN decision on its application for registration under the legal framework on religion, which it submitted to the central-level Committee for Religious Affairs in mid-2005. (See ref B for additional information on the UWMC.)

¶10. (SBU) In a phone conversation after Easter, senior SECV leader Pastor Siu Y Kim, , told us that all churches and "meeting points" in Gia Lai were able to hold Easter services without incident. He noted that this now tends to be the rule for the SECV in the province on any given Sunday, although the provincial SECV board periodically has to intervene with local officials to head off possible incidents. Conditions in neighboring Kontum province also generally were positive except for Sa Thay district. In mid-March, two SECV followers there were beaten by police and fined for leaving the village for six days without first securing a temporary absence permit. When Kim intervened, provincial officials apologized, but the two offending officials remained unpunished. (Note: Per ref C, Sa Thay district struck us as the most retrograde area that we have seen in the Central Highlands, when we traveled there to assess the welfare of ethnic minority returnees from Cambodia in January 2006. End Note.)

¶11. (SBU) Pastor Nghia Xuan Bao of the Vietnam Presbyterian church reported that, with two exceptions, Presbyterian house churches were able to celebrate Easter. In Dak Lak and Lam Dong provinces, police halted services in two congregations, arguing that they were not allowed to operate until they were registered under the law.

Outside Interference in the Central Highlands?

¶12. (SBU) In a separate conversation in HCMC, Pastor Kim (strictly protect) reacted angrily to allegations made in a Montagnard Foundation (MF) press release in the United States that provincial government officials forced worshipers to pray before a picture of Ho Chi Minh during the February 2006 inauguration of a new SECV church in Gia Lai. He said that the SECV continues to face provocations from the MF aimed at undermining the credibility and independence of the SECV. MF operatives were threatening ethnic minority pastors that unless

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they break with the SECV, they would not be allowed to serve as pastors once an ethnic minority "Dega" state is established. He alleged that MF operatives also were circulating among ethnic minority villagers, claiming that a Dega state would be proclaimed in the Central Highlands "soon."

SECV elsewhere in Vietnam

¶13. (SBU) Reporting on SECV operations outside the Central Highlands, Pastor Le Van Thien, General Secretary of the SECV, said that, with a few exceptions, the SECV was able to conduct Easter services without incident. In Dong Nai province near HCMC, an SECV "meeting point" continues to have its services disrupted by local authorities, despite the SECV's protests. This church has had chronic problems with local authorities. Thien also confirmed reports that a small ethnic Hre SECV congregation in Quang Ngai continues to suffer harassment that led to the burning of a number of ethnic Hre homes in August

2005 (ref D). Recently "war veterans" burned the rice storage sheds of two ethnic Hre believers, he said. On a more hopeful note, Pastor Thien noted that the government recently ended its objections and allowed the two SECV preachers at the center of the dispute in Quang Ngai to participate in an SECV pastoral training course. Similarly, an unrecognized branch of the SECV in Baria-Vung Tau province was allowed to resume operations following the intervention of the national SECV representative board with higher-level authorities.

Comment

¶14. (SBU) Comment: The reports from the SECV and registered and unregistered house churches indicate that the overall level of pressure on the Protestant community in southern and central Vietnam continues to ebb. The congregations that suffered harassment over Easter have longstanding problems with local authorities -- such as Sa Thay district in Kontum. These areas are increasingly the exception rather than the rule in HCMC's consular district. Central- and provincial-level officials still need to do more to ensure that the new legal framework is consistently implemented, particularly in rural, isolated areas.

¶15. (SBU) Despite recent progress, house church leaders remain deeply suspicious of the GVN and its long-term commitment to improve religious freedom conditions in Vietnam. This lack of trust amplifies their reluctance to apply for registration under the law; they fear it will simply expose them to even greater scrutiny and pressure in the future. For their part, Vietnamese officials tell us of their frustration with the unwillingness of key house church leaders to register. We have encouraged them to continue to adopt a patient, supportive approach. We also have stressed that they must intercede effectively and rapidly to resolve religious freedom problems that come to their attention.

¶16. (SBU) Comment Continued: We cannot independently confirm Pastor Kim's recent allegations that the U.S.-based Montagnard Foundation is spreading separatist sentiment and attempting to undermine the SECV in the Central Highlands. However, Pastor Kim's reporting has been reliable in the past and he is respected within the SECV and the house church community. End Comment.

WINNICK